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A STUDY WAS MADE IN NEBRASKA IN 1965 TO EXAMINE THE RELATIONSHIP OF FOUR INDEPENDENT VARIABLES--OPINION LEADERSHIP, INTEREST, GREGARIOUSNESS, AND SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS--TO THE EXTENT OF INFORMATION SEEKING AND THE RATIO OF INTERPERSONAL TO MEDIATED SOURCES, AND TO DETERMINE WHETHER THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE FIRST FOUR AND THE LAST TWO VARIABLES HOLD TRUE FOR DIFFERENT AREAS. DATA WERE COLLECTED BY PERSONAL INTERVIEWS WITH OVER 400 PERSONS. AS PREDICTED, THE DEGREE OF INFORMATION SEEKING AND OF RECOURSE TO INTERPERSONAL SOURCES WAS POSITIVELY RELATED TO OPINION LEADERSHIP, AND INTERPERSONAL INFORMATION SEEKING CORRELATED POSITIVELY WITH INTEREST IN SPECIFIC ISSUES (WOMEN WORKING AND TAXATION). HOWEVER, THE EXTENT OF INFORMATION SEEKING AND OF RECOURSE TO INTERPERSONAL SOURCES WERE NEGATIVELY RELATED TO THE SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS ONLY ON THE TAXATION ISSUE, AND THE EXTENT OF INFORMATION SEEKING FAILED TO CORRELATE POSITIVELY EITHER WITH THE DEGREE OF ISSUE INTEREST OR WITH GREGARIOUSNESS ON THE ISSUE OF WOMEN WORKING. MOREOVER, USE OF INTERPERSONAL SOURCES WAS NOT POSITIVELY RELATED TO GREGARIOUSNESS ON EITHER ISSUE. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL SEMINAR ON ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH, CHICAGO, FEBRUARY 11-13, 1968. (LY)

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INFORMATION SEEKING, OPINION LEADERSHIP AND SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS FOR DIFFERENT ISSUES

By: Dr. Shirley A. White

The study of personal influence over the past twenty years has consistently produced evidence of the importance of face to face interaction in opinion formation and decision making as related to mediated sources of information. This study investigated information-seeking in a broad context, comparing mediated and interpersonal sources for two issues: one, job opportunities for women; and two, broadening the state tax base. It was assumed that these two issues would reveal different modes of communication behavior. The research investigated theoretic interests about the concept of personal influency be using an information-seeking measure to index probable effects of contacts with interpersonal and mediated communication channels.

The objectives of the research were:

1. To examine the relationship of four variables — opinion leadership, sense of powerlessness, interest, and gregariousness — to the extent of information-seeking.

2. To examine the relationship of four variables — opinion leadership, sense of powerlessness, interest, and gregariousness — to the degree of interpersonalness in information-seeking.

3. To determine whether the relationships between the four variables and (1) extent of information-seeking, and (2) degree of interpersonalness, hold true for different areas.

The sample for the study (1965) was 500 persons, randomly drawn, from an original random sample of 1500 persons (1961) in the state of Nebraska. In 1961 the larger sample was checked against the 1960 U. S. Census figures for Nebraska's population. It was found to be representative on such socio-economic variables as sex, age, marital status, formal education, occupation, and income. The sample of 500 drawn in 1965 was also checked against the 1960 U. S. Census. Both sample populations were found to be representative, no differences beyond one-half of one per cent.

Data were collected via personal interviews by trained interviewers. A part of their training was collection of data for the pretest of the study. The interview schedule was pretested on a random sample from one Nebraska county. The county chosen was not a part of the sample for the final study and was chosen because there was a large city, a small town, and rural dwellers there, approximately proportional to the total for the state. Eighty-six interviews were completed and constituted the pilot study sample. Four hundred-two interviews were completed and constituted the final study sample population.

Information-seeking was the dependent variable of the study, defined as the degree to which a receiver (person) utilizes mediated and interpersonal communication channels to obtain ideas, advice, or information about a specific issue. Information-seeking was operationalized as frequency of information-seeking (number of contacts with a mediated or interpersonal source) and degree of interpersonalness (the ratio of interpersonal to mediated sources).

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Two issues were studied: a public affairs issue (taxation) and a social issue (women working).

The research focused on the four independent variables considered to be predisposing factors in information-seeking behavior:

1. Opinion leadership, defined as a person who himself indicates that he influences the opinion and behavior of other individuals through personal contact;

2. Sense of powerlessness, defined as a feeling of lack of control over the outcome of public or social issues and a low expectancy that one's own behavior can alter them;

3. Issue interest, defined as a psychological involvement of the individual with an issue which facilitates awareness and action; and

4. Gregariousness, defined as the extent of an individual's formal and informal social contacts with other people.

Within the framework of the research, the communication situation involves the PERSON subject to INFLUENCE by advice, ideas, or information which is relative to an ISSUE, via interpersonal or mediated CHANNELS in making a DECISION. An implied definition of influence within this model is that force which via mediated or interpersonal channels, affects a response (from the person) which is, namely, information-seeking.

The strategy of influence is important to persuasive communications and the concept of influence is fundamental to an analysis of information-seeking activity. It was believed that by examining the nature of an individual's search for information on different types of issues, that one could better compare ways in which channels of influence might be specialized for different types of issues. This would provide guidelines for selecting the channels of communication to be used for introducing messages into the communication network.

The general theme of alienation in contemporary life is a significant one. It was thought that further insights into this concept (particularly one dimension, sense of powerlessness) might be gained by examining this variable within a communication framework. Further investigation of the interplay between mediated and interpersonal communications sources adds a new dimension to literature on this two-step flow of communication. Information-seeking behavior as examined in this study, it was thought, could be used as a basis for comparing communication behavior of different types of persons relative to different issues.

Findings of the Research

General Hypothesis I predicted that the extent of information-seeking was positively related to opinion leadership. This hypothesis was confirmed.

There was a significant positive relationship between opinion leadership and extent of information-seeking for both the taxation issue and women working issue. The higher the opinion leadership score, the more frequent were the information-seeking contacts.

A closer look at the data reveals that correlations on the taxation issue were consistently higher on mediated than on interpersonal sources, while for the women working issue correlations were slightly higher for the interpersonal sources. This would indicate that opinion leaders tended to get more information from mediated sources in regard to taxation but more from interpersonal sources on the women working issue.

The number of different channels sought on the taxation issue increased as the degree of opinion leadership increased. This was also true of the women working issue but this increase was proportionately greater for the taxation issue than for the women working issue. This would indicate that the type of opinion leadership for the two issues would vary, that on a public affairs issue, the breadth of contact with information channels might be a more important factor than it would for a social affairs issue.

General Hypothesis II predicted that the degree of interpersonalness of information-seeking is positively related to opinion leadership. This hypothesis was confirmed. As opinion leadership increases, so does the interpersonalness of information-seeking. However, the ratio of interpersonal to mediated channels is higher for the women working issue than for the taxation issue. That is, interpersonal sources on the women working issue are more frequently sought than are mediated sources by those persons scoring high on opinion leadership. Indications are that for the social issue, individuals appear to have frequent contacts with fewer channels and the channel sought would more often be an interpersonal channel than a mediated channel.

Opinion leadership activity for both the taxation issue and the women working issue reflects information-seeking through both mediated channels and interpersonal channels. Information-seeking contacts are similar on both issues, but there is an indication from closer examinations of the data that interpersonal contact was more frequent when individuals were seeking information on job opportunities for women than on matters of taxation.

Consistent with findings from the previous research cited, opinion leadership can be considered as one variable which has bearing on information-seeking through both mediated and interpersonal channels. This relationship would indicate that the self-designated opinion leader would account for increasing amount of interaction with channels of influence as his personal influence was broadened to affect other opinion leaders or non-opinion leaders. For the two issues in question, it would appear that opinion leaders might play a larger role in affecting people on the social issues, since the amount of interpersonal contact was greater than for the public affairs.

General Hypothesis III predicted that the extent of information-seeking is negatively related to sense of powerlessness. This was confirmed for the taxation issue but not for the women working issue.

This prediction held that those persons who felt a lack of control over the issues in question would tend to be low frequency information-seekers. As their sense of powerlessness increased or as they felt increasingly powerless to do anything about an issue, information-seeking would decrease. The research found this to be so, for both the taxation and the women working issues. However, for the women working issue, sense of powerlessness did not tend to lower the number of channels sought.

In search for some explanation as to why there were differences in results for the two issues, clues might be found in the nature of the issue itself. The greater personalness of the social issue might lead people to search out personal sources. Information from people who were concerned about women in their worker role, might be more credible in that type of information-seeking situation. Another clue might be found in the nature of the general sense of powerlessness measure. The items in the measure itself tend to suggest those aspects of life that are outside one's immediate environment and therefore thought to be less easily controlled. A woman, interested in her own job opportunities, or a man interested in his wife's job opportunities, for example, might feel in complete control of the issue. They personally would determine the amount or type of information necessary to cope perhaps with impending decisions about it. It might also suggest that the necessity of information-seeking might be connected with an immediate decision, and in case of job opportunities might only go as far as looking for listings themselves. In other words, for the women working issue, information-seeking might occur only when a decision was to be made and at this time people become a more important source of information than mass media.

General Hypothesis IV predicted that the degree of interpersonalness of information-seeking is negatively related to sense of powerlessness. This was found to be so for the taxation issue.

The more powerless a person felt, the less contact he had with interpersonal sources. This perhaps indicates that persons who have a high sense of control would also tend to be the persons who would tend to seek out persons to make influence attempts. When decisions are to be made about taxation, persons who felt they had some say in the matter would be likely to talk to other persons to discuss the issues. Those who felt they could not affect the issue would tend to be apathetic and dismiss the issue perhaps completely.

General Hypothesis IV was not confirmed for the women working issue. Actually this is a surprise, because this issue could be considered closer to the individual than the taxation issue, particularly if some woman in the household was employed outside the home. However, as an objective topic, it may be that, for the general population, it isn't an issue they feel is necessary to discuss with people whether they are or are not required to make decisions about it.

General Hypothesis V predicted that extent of information-seeking is positively related to degree of issue interest. This hypothesis was confirmed for the taxation issue. For the women working issue, the empirical hypothesis on frequency of information-seeking was confirmed but was not confirmed on number of different channels. It seems reasonable that persons who are interested

and concerned over an issue in question would search out people to talk to about it or would attend with interest to messages in the mass media. However, the data would suggest that for the women working issue the highly interested person may be having a lot of contact with a few channels in a search for information. This might indicate that there are fewer channels available on the women working issue than on the taxation issue.

The strong correlation between interest and channel scores on the taxation issue and the lack of significant correlation on the women working issue might reflect a definite lack of interest in the issue itself.

General Hypothesis VI predicted that the degree of interpersonalness of information-seeking was positively related to degree of issue interest. This hypothesis was confirmed for both the taxation and the women working issues. The examination of the interpersonalness ratio, which is significant for both issues, would further lead to a conclusion that interpersonal sources are more important for the women working issue. Since the frequency of contacts for the women working issue is highly significant, the greater proportion of the contacts must be interpersonal ones. Interest then on that issue could result in an issue that is more often discussed with people than a public affairs issue, such as taxation. The information search might end with discussion rather than leading to a variety of sources from other mediated channels.

General Hypothesis VII predicted that the extent of information-seeking is positively related to degree of gregariousness. This hypothesis was confirmed for the taxation issue but not confirmed for the women working issue.

Previous research has consistently linked gregariousness with information-seeking. Gregariousness suggests a social dimension — seeking out people. Persons concerned about the taxation issue would tend to be seeking information from some "inside" communication channels that perhaps exist only in some social settings where officials of government tend to be. What appears in mass media would not be complete enough to satisfy the person who wanted to make his voice heard with persons who make decisions about taxation.

For the women working issue there was no support for linking information-seeking with gregariousness. This is a finding which is contradictory to the finding of Katz-Lazarsfeld's study of women. They found gregariousness to be a factor in personal influence. It could be that, in a general population, information-seeking on the women working issue would be less a factor of actual numbers of contacts with channels, than seeking out the most significant channel.

General Hypothesis VIII predicted that the degree of interpersonalness in information-seeking is positively related to degree of gregariousness. This hypothesis was confirmed for either issue.

Since communication does take place within a social context, particularly person to person communication, it would be expected that a person's gregariousness would be an inherent factor. In this research, however, this did not appear to be so. This research would tend to indicate that the degree of interpersonalness is not related to information search. Search for information could not be equated to a need for being with people.

In our highly gregarious society, perhaps this is no longer a factor crucial to persons coming in contact with relevant information sources. In societies where transportation and communications networks are less developed, people would be apt to depend more heavily on people as a source of information. In such societies, the need to be with people might be equated with need for information — perhaps for survival.

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